



Digital Divide Magnified for Rural, Older Veterans Living “Off the Grid”

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Background

Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) Connect is an enterprise-wide dissemination project funded by the VA Office of Rural Health. The national network (Fig. 1) includes 18 GRECC Connect hub sites based at VA medical facilities in urban centers. Hub sites partner with VA community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) to increase access to geriatric specialty care for rural, older Veterans with multiple chronic conditions and complex care needs through telemedicine.



Figure 1. National GRECC Connect hub site map.

Objective

To support strategic planning, the GRECC Connect national qualitative evaluation core explored facilitators and barriers to the uptake of GRECC Connect services among CBOC providers and patients.

Methods

We conducted 50 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with providers in four rural, VA-affiliated CBOCs. Interviews were conducted by phone between February and May 2020. The clinics were in geographically distinct regions. (Associated GRECC Connect hub sites are highlighted in Fig. 1.) We prioritized recruiting those likely to refer to GRECC Connect and/or coordinate telemedicine visits, including:

- primary care physicians
- social workers
- psychologists
- nurse clinic managers
- telehealth technicians.

Interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour, were recorded with permission, professionally transcribed and checked for accuracy. We used framework analysis to identify key patterns and themes.

Results – Factors impacting Digital Access among Rural, Older Veterans

Rural, Older Veterans on the Edge of the Digital Divide

Infrastructure	“I have Veterans that in theory have the technology and they know how to use it, but their internet is not strong enough ... So, I have not been able to do any video visits ... The lack of high-speed internet in our area is huge.” Psychologist
Access to technology	“It seems that it's really hard for a lot of them to access virtual care other than just the phone. I don't know if that's ... because they don't have the technology or the familiarity with it.” Psychologist
Digital literacy combined with physical limitations	“You're asking an 80-year-old man to not only navigate an email but navigate an iPad. 'Click here, click there.' Some might have Parkinson's. Some might have hearing loss. Some have sight issues. We're trying to make everything more acceptable to them, but we're also [asking] them to do something that is hard for them and not familiar and that they're not comfortable with.” Telehealth Technician

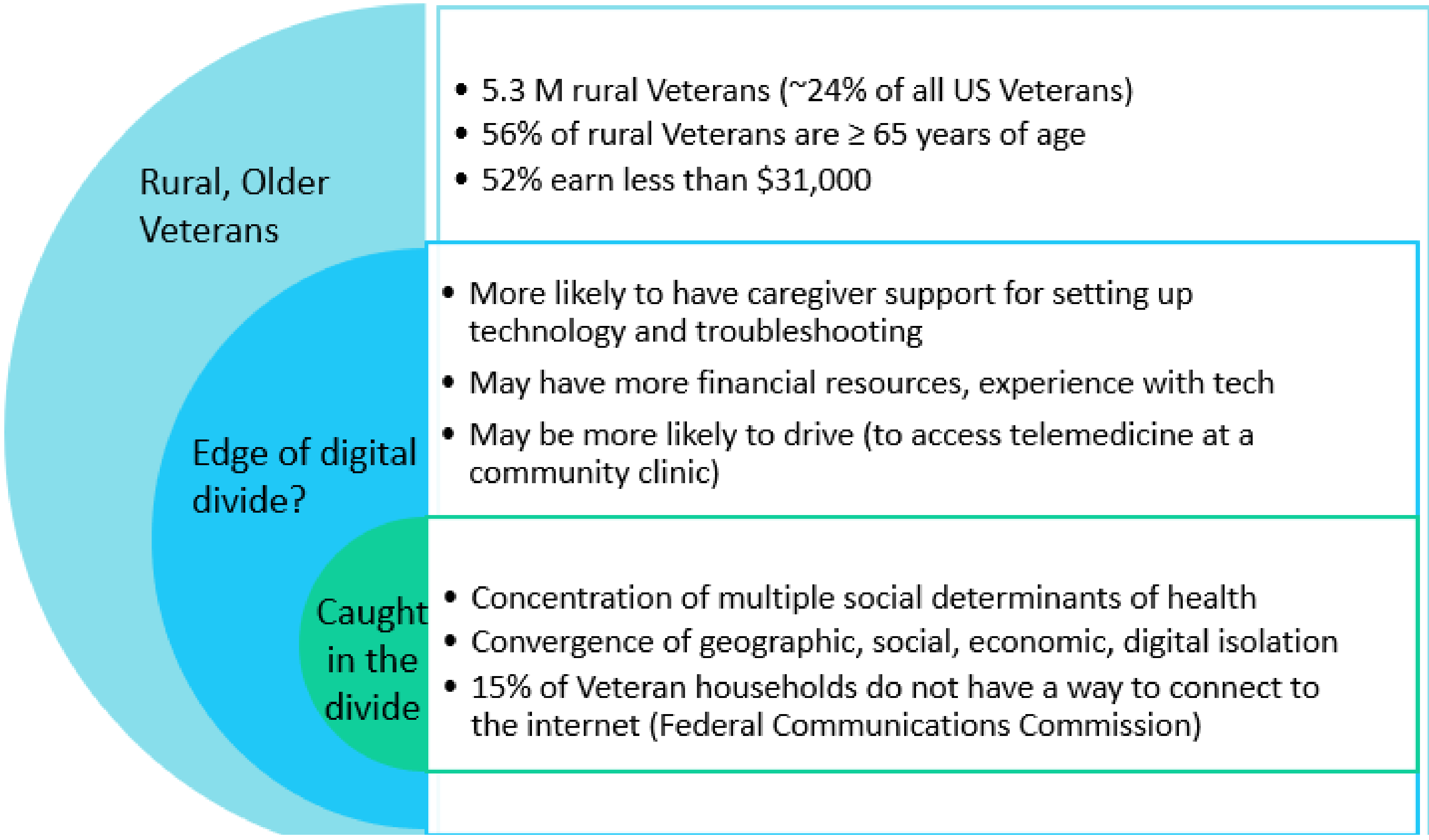
Isolation is a “meta-influencer” (constraining choice, perspective, hope)

Geographically and Socially Isolated Veterans in the Digital Divide

Off the Grid	“They live in little tiny communities that branch out on the peninsula with 60 to 70 miles between ... Many of these patients live up in the mountains, or they live in areas that are very off the grid. They don't have computer access or cellphone access.” Clinic Manager “Our older Veterans – there are a number of them, especially again with PTSD, ... they're living off the grid. And if they had local places where they could just drop in and connect for basic needs, medical needs and mental health needs, that would be amazing.” Social Worker
Experiencing Homelessness	“We also have a very large homeless population, unfortunately, living in the area that live ... in the trees and, ... in little caves, trying to survive out here.” Clinic Manager
Intersectionality (Geography, Age, SES)	“A lot of our more rural patients ... don't tend to have on-line access ... Many are very poor and [are] on the edge of homeless, living in trailers out on little pieces of land ... By the time they call into the Call Center and sit on hold for ten or 20 minutes ... [or we] try to call them back and get through to them, it's not easy even when we do finally make contact. That system isn't working well for that population. The younger patients are on computers and cellphones. They seem to be much more reachable, and they may have more financial means, too ...” Primary Care Provider

Conclusion

Digital Divide – Another Social Determinant of Health for Rural, Older Veterans



Two key tensions with policy, program and practice implications:

